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OUR COMMUNITY

## CAPITOL CONNECTION

SEPTEMBER 2021

### From the governor: It's up to all of us to stop the surge

**"The fight has changed."** That stark assessment from Dr. Libby Char, Department of Health director, underscores the urgency of the moment as Hawai'i and the rest of the nation battle the **highly transmissible Delta variant**. Protests about personal freedoms pale against the alarming case counts, hospital beds filled with younger, unvaccinated patients, healthcare worker shortages, and unprotected keiki who have returned to school. The best way to curb the spread of infection is to get vaccinated, say public health experts, the governor and the county mayors. Government can't do it alone. That's why they're urging — no, pleading — with people to **get their shots, wear their masks and do their part to stop this dangerous surge**.

#### Q. What more can people do to stop the spread of the Delta variant?

A. We've struggled with that since the Fourth of July weekend. The Delta variant is a very different strain of the coronavirus and significantly more transmissible. Obviously, vaccination is the best solution. We know it's the unvaccinated 18-to-44-year-olds who are getting infected. We're averaging twice what we saw at the peak last year. Our healthcare workers are beyond exhaustion. They're frustrated because they're working so hard to keep everyone safe, and this is a preventable situation. The best way to stop this COVID surge is for everyone to take personal responsibility because government can't be everywhere. We've seen more COVID clusters from people who went to work when they were sick. That's something we can't do anymore.

#### Q. What would you say to those who argue it's their right to not be vaccinated?

A. It's unfortunate that some are listening to misinformation on social media instead of our doctors and nurses on the front lines. If someone is unvaccinated, it impacts all of us. In Hawai'i, we know we have to take care of each other. We've made vaccine information available in different ways, but people are more inclined to listen to the advice of a friend or family member. More than 90% of those hospitalized with COVID in this spike are unvaccinated, and they're infecting others. We can't keep asking our healthcare heroes to save us when we can save ourselves with the choices we make.

#### Q. What about health passes to enter restaurants or changes to the Safe Travels program?

A. We're evaluating the possibility of both health passes for indoor venues and changes to Safe Travels. We're also seeing more support for requiring vaccinations or testing for company employees because that creates a healthier environment for everyone. I do appreciate the many businesses providing incentives through our **#HIGotVaccinated program**.

#### Q. Why should state and county workers either be vaccinated or tested for COVID-19?

A. Many state and county employees provide essential services that must continue during the pandemic. We also wanted to do everything we could to keep our hospitals from being overrun. Locally and nationally, more hospital systems and government agencies are requiring employees to get vaccinated or tested to protect everyone they come in contact with. It's a choice we're asking employees to make for the safety of the whole community.

#### Q. Why is the 70 percent fully vaccinated benchmark not a good target anymore?

A. With the higher transmissibility of the Delta variant, we're going to need more community protection. Just look at the case counts in the last 7 to 10 days. If we can't control the virus, our hospitals will be overrun. That's what scares me the most. If that happens, we'll have to ration care and more people will die. In the worst-case scenario, we'll be back to a lockdown.



Gov. Ige urged the public to get vaccinated and tested. More COVID-19 cases were reported among children, with some hospitals 'at capacity.'

### Pfizer vaccine gets full FDA approval; governor advises against travel

The Food and Drug Administration has granted full approval of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for people 16 and older. The Aug. 23 action provides additional assurance for anyone waiting to get their shots and is expected to clear the way for vaccine requirements by numerous organizations.

Also, with the surge in COVID-19 cases, Governor Ige is advising Hawai'i residents and visitors to limit travel, at least through the end of October. "I'm asking all residents and visitors alike to restrict travel to essential activities only," he said, "at least until we can stem the surge."

# Dr. Libby Char issues COVID warning: ‘We are on fire’

**The news couldn't be more horrifying:** Hawai'i is seeing thousands of people infected with COVID-19 — more than any other time since the pandemic began. Just a few weeks ago, Hawai'i had some of the lowest case counts in the nation. So what happened? The highly contagious Delta variant hit our shores and has torn through the islands with a speed that has shocked even the most seasoned healthcare professionals.

**“Look at the map where the cases are. It's everywhere,”** said Department of Health director Dr. Libby Char at an Aug. 13 news conference when 1,167 new cases were reported. **“All the communities. The entire map is red right now . . . We are on fire.”** The tragedy and the promise, which both Governor Ige and Dr. Char pointed out, is we have it within our power to slow the spread. **“Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> has never been more frightening,”** said the governor. **“It is real, it is terrifying and, tragically, it is preventable.** Our healthcare heroes on the frontlines are again being asked to save us. It is unfair — unfair because we all can save ourselves. The actions we take, each and every day, can make a difference in the battle against COVID.”



Dr. Libby Char implored the public to help stem the surge.

**Those actions include getting vaccinated, wearing our masks, not traveling or gathering in groups and having a COVID plan in case you test positive.** “Please, if you're not vaccinated, get vaccinated,” said the governor. “It's the best thing to do to help yourself and our community. It is clear that the vaccines are safe and effective. They do an amazing job of preventing severe illness, hospitalization and death.” The DOH is ramping up vaccinations, testing and contact tracing, but the sheer number of cases means residents need to help stop the spread. Dr. Char said the reason the DOH is concerned about **travel-related clusters involving local residents** is the likelihood they can spread it more widely. “Returning residents are mingling with family and friends, going back to work and can spread the virus to many, many more people,” she explained. For free testing sites, go to <https://hawaii-covid19.com/testing-isolation-quarantine/>.

**People keep asking, “When will things get better?”** Dr. Char replied, “It depends on what we as a community decide to do. We have the tools; we know what to do. I know you're asking the governor whether they're going to impose any more mandates. Honestly, I feel like my family doesn't need a mandate to know what we're supposed to do, and I think there are so many of you out there who are exactly in the same boat. **We all know what to do. It's just a matter of us doing it.”**

## The hard truth: ‘The community is giving it to each other’

**“When we have hospitals that are really worried about being able to take care of people, that's a crisis. When we see this exponential growth in the amount of people getting infected with COVID every day — 2,000 in the past three days — that's a crisis. And the point at which we overwhelm our resources, that is a disaster.”**

— Dr. Libby Char

**Here are some of the sobering facts about the Delta variant that need repeating to family, friends and anyone who will listen:**

- **This is a pandemic of the unvaccinated** — More than 90% of residents hospitalized with COVID-19 are unvaccinated, say state officials. But there have also been reports of breakthrough cases, increasing the risk that vaccinated people can also spread the virus. It's vital to get tested and take other safety measures if you have symptoms.
- **The Delta variant is different** — “It used to be if you were fully vaccinated, you could do just about anything,” said Dr. Char. “But the Delta variant being so pervasive, the fight has changed. When someone is infected, they have about one-thousand times

as much virus in them than those who had the original-type COVID. Even if you're fully vaccinated, if you're sitting next to somebody with COVID, having lunch or having a drink, you're being bombarded with the virus, and you have a very real chance that it could overwhelm your system and you could become infected.”

- **Even the vaccine has its limits** — “The vaccine helps prevent severe illness and death, but we don't have the armor we once thought we had, so we need to be thoughtful about our actions,” said Dr. Char. That includes wearing masks, avoiding crowds, physical distancing, frequent hand washing and staying home when we're sick.

- **“Younger, sicker, quicker”** — That's how some health care workers are describing what they're seeing in recent Delta variant patients. Governor Ige said, “Our hospitals are filling up. They're treating younger and younger people. Yesterday, we reported the death of a man in his 30s.” On the neighbor islands, Mike Rembis, CEO of Maui Health, told the Honolulu Star-Advertiser, “There's an alarming number of people in their 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s being admitted.” Also, the state's biggest spike in new cases has been among young people with lower vaccination rates.

- **Hospitals are overwhelmed and healthcare workers are exhausted** — Elena Cabatu, director of public relations at Hilo Medical Center, spoke for many in the healthcare system when she told the Star-Advertiser: “We are pleading with the community that has not yet gotten vaccinated to get vaccinated. . . . What we are asking is the community to just know they are giving it to each other; it's no longer someone else's problem,” she said. **“Lots of people are blaming the tourists, but at this point it's all community spread.”**

# State, county actions to curb Delta variant spike

**A**larming case numbers from the fast-moving Delta variant, combined with slowing vaccination rates despite community campaigns, compelled Governor Ige and the county mayors to make the tough call: **All state and county employees now need to provide proof of vaccination or be subject to regular COVID-19 testing.** Free testing sites are available, but if not used, employees must cover any testing costs.



“Today the number of cases and hospitalizations are all trending up — dramatically,” said the governor. “The highly contagious Delta variant creates a big risk of infection, especially for members of our community who are not vaccinated. Based on the current conditions, I must take action to protect public health and avert unmanageable strains on our health care all across the state.” Hawai’i island Mayor Mitch Roth added, “It was our sincere hope that we wouldn’t have to come to this to get people to do the right thing for the community. Enough is enough already.” Kauai Mayor Derek Kawakami pointed out the options are clear. “It gives our workers choices to either opt-in to vaccinate, which I strongly suggest, or opt in for testing. What works is vaccination, early detection through testing and wearing masks.”



Gov. Ige with (clockwise) Mayors Blangiardi, Kawakami, Roth and Maui county managing director Baz at Aug. 10 news conference.

**Also, an Aug. 10 executive order signed by Governor Ige** sets statewide limits for social gatherings, restaurants, bars and social establishments. “The Delta variant has changed the course of the pandemic in Hawai’i,” said the governor. “We are seeing the highest case numbers since this pandemic began. This requires immediate and serious attention to avert unmanageable strains on our healthcare system and other catastrophic impacts to the state.” The executive order will remain in place **until Oct. 18**, unless superseded by a subsequent order. The measures include:

- Social gatherings will be limited to no more than 10 people indoors and no more than 25 people outdoors.
- Indoor capacity for restaurants, bars, gyms and other social establishments is set at 50%. Patrons must remain seated with 6-foot distancing between groups. There will be no mingling, and masks must be worn at all times except when actively eating or drinking.
- Some county mayors are also in discussion with the governor about further restrictions. Honolulu Mayor Blangiardi has suspended large gatherings for four weeks, including weddings, funerals and events at the Waikiki Shell and Blaisdell Center.

## Getting in GEER: Good news for students, communities

**W**hat if you could attract some of the state’s most innovative educators and community partners and provide them with enough support to make a difference for students and whole communities? That was Governor Ige’s vision when he and his **Governor’s Emergency Education Relief (GEER)** advisory group issued the call for creative, collaborative approaches to education. The federal GEER funds were allocated to all of the nation’s governors to help schools respond to the pandemic and the challenges it created. Some governors opted to fund more remote learning equipment and PPE, but the Ige team wanted to think even bigger. For Hawai’i, the funds provided a way to build on the governor’s **2016 Blueprint for Public Education** and reinvent learning in a world changed by COVID-19. Out of more than 200 applicants, 31 awardees were chosen. Each project has multiple partners across several islands — from public and private schools and colleges to nonprofits.



**Why are these innovation grants so important?** “The GEER funds are helping us create a network of innovation to better connect with students,” said the governor. “Often we say government is very risk-averse. We wanted this grant program to encourage schools and teachers to take risks and support creative ideas so we can transform education. That’s what makes it so exciting.” **The result is 31 of the most inspiring, creative initiatives you could imagine with the potential to change lives — and, in some cases, entire communities.** If that sounds a little over the top, just talk with some of the project coordinators who will be launching their programs with the \$8.1 million in GEER funding. They speak to some of the most pressing issues facing students today: learning differences and drop-out rates, food insecurity, leadership training, family literacy and culture-based questions. Many projects take on some of the state’s toughest issues, such as teacher shortages and helping small businesses survive a pandemic as well as providing career pathways to build Hawai’i’s future in telehealth, sustainable agriculture, digital and other creative arts, genome science and natural resource management.

**To further build the innovation legacy of the project**, all the participants will become part of a “community of practice” to create lessons that can be shared with other schools and organizations. They’ll also come together next summer to present their final projects in a public forum for more sharing of ideas. “With so many schools involved, we wanted these projects to create a real community of innovators to carry us into the future,” said the governor, “beyond the pandemic.” For a list of awardees, project descriptions and the schools involved statewide, go to <https://governor.hawaii.gov/main/governors-emergency-education-relief-geer-awards-by-name/>.

# Even in a pandemic, hope comes in many forms

With the pandemic dominating the news, it's hard to focus on anything else. And yet, good news is all around us if we look hard enough. In the past few weeks, that included world-class athletes like Hawai'i's **Carissa Moore** winning gold at the Tokyo Olympics and some impressive, innovative programs in schools statewide.

**Waipahu High School's Academy of Health and Sciences** and 2020 valedictorian **Loise Medina** were part of the pop-up vaccination clinic visited by **First Lady Dr. Jill Biden** in July. In a partnership with Hawaii Pacific Health, the school offers high school seniors like Loise tuition-free training as medical assistants and employment at an HPH facility. Other Academy programs include Clinical Health, Community Health Worker, Health and Nutrition, Medical Biotechnology and Pharmacy Tech to help fill the future need for skilled healthcare workers.



Mrs. Ige with Ka'u's Aina Akamu, Sharon Beck and Chad Farias.

Another innovation site is **Ka'u High and Pahala Elementary**, where First Lady Dawn Amano-Ige is the honorary chair of "**Ka'u Dream**," an initiative to help build Ka'u into a resilient learning community. The vision is to transition Ka'u High from a traditional institution into an academy that helps students move from education to employment and help revitalize the Ka'u area. The school is also the site of the **Ka'u Global Learning Lab**, a GEER awardee that plans to create programs in agricultural entrepreneurship, health and education and middle school pre-academies.

"The **Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER)** projects give us tremendous hope for the future," said Mrs. Ige. "All the GEER projects bring collaboration, innovation and student-driven work to the forefront." As for programs like the ones at Ka'u, Mrs. Ige added, "I always tell them, it's no longer just Ka'u 'Dream'; it's already happening. We're well on our way to achieving so many good things for the students and the community."

## Olympian Carissa Moore thanks the people of Hawai'i

She's a gold medal winner, a four-time world surfing champion, an ambassador of aloha and an inspiration to girls and young women everywhere. But for all that, Carissa Moore spoke with humility and heart as a keiki o ka'aina when she was honored by Governor Ige at a ceremony proclaiming **Aug. 5 as "Carissa Moore Day" in Hawai'i**. "I am truly overwhelmed with all the love I've been shown," said Moore. "I wouldn't be where I am today without my 'ohana, my friends and family, the community of people in Hawai'i that raised me to represent the United States, but especially Hawai'i. My home, my heart is Hawai'i."



Governor and Mrs. Ige honor Carissa Moore.

The governor, joined by First Lady Dawn Amano-Ige and Hawai'i Tourism Authority CEO John DeFries, described the pride people in the islands feel for their homegrown hero after her performance at the Tokyo Olympics. "Your Olympic spirit is matched only by your spirit of aloha," said the governor. "Carissa gives us hope in these challenging times that when you do what you love with passion and commitment, nothing is impossible. Thank you for making all of Hawai'i proud."

## Responding to the Delta surge

**More free COVID-19 testing** is now available on the neighbor islands, and expansion is expected on O'ahu. Pre-registration at <https://preventcovidhi.com/> is recommended. The program augments Hawai'i's network of free community testing with options available at [HawaiiCOVID19.com/testing](https://HawaiiCOVID19.com/testing).

Also, the Department of Health has announced that **more than 500 experienced healthcare professionals from out of state** will be deployed to 19 hospitals statewide in the coming weeks with funds from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Hawai'i will receive \$46 million in federal funding to bring in traveling healthcare workers through ProLink Healthcare.

## DLIR delays Sept. 7 opening, but expands phone appointments

Due to the spike in COVID-19 cases, the state Department of Labor & Industrial Relations has announced several ways the public can still talk to someone about their situation, instead of in person.

Those who have complex, disputed unemployment insurance claims can speak to an examiner to assist with fact-finding for their situation. Expanded telephone appointments for claimants with general inquiries are now available as well as for those with Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) claims and for employer services. Appointments can be made at <https://labor.hawaii.gov/ui/appointments/>. Nearly 1,700 weekly appointments are available.

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